The **Transforming Power** of the **Liturgy**

The Sick and Dying

The spread of COVID-19 reminded us of our limitations and vulnerability, and of the enduring reality of sickness and death. Many of us were already in touch with these realities, living with them daily: those with chronic and terminal illness, with weakened immune systems, with physical and mental disabilities. But the pandemic confronted all with the fact that every human being exists on a scale of sickness, or, as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has written, a "scale of disability." The public health emergency led civil authorities to limit in-person gatherings and enact other requirements. Dioceses, in turn, limited the celebration of public worship.

How might the experience of the pandemic contribute to our understanding of the liturgy's transforming power? How might that time reveal first, the relationship of the sick and the dying to the liturgy, and second, how the Lord makes us a people who care for the sick and the dying through the liturgy?

Theology

The full meaning of sickness and death as well as the Church's care for the sick and dying lie in the person of Jesus Christ. He himself freely embraced suffering and death, he identified with the sick and the dying, and he had compassion on them. Healing the sick and dying are among Christ's first miracles (Mk 1:29-31; 5:41-42). Having heard of the Lord's healing power, people either bring the sick and dying to him or intercede with him on their behalf (Mk 1:32-34; Mk 5:22-23). This aspect of Christ's work is so central that St. Matthew includes it alongside teaching and preaching in his summary statements of Christ's ministry (4:23; 9:35). Christ entrusts the care of the sick and the dying to his apostles, and after his resurrection, he notes that healing the sick is a sign that will accompany those who believe in him (Mt 10:1, Mk 6:13, Lk 9:1-2; Mk 16:18). Ultimately, Christ identifies with the sick to such an extent that they become his presence in the world: "When I was sick, you visited me" (Mt 25:36). This care for the sick continues in the early Church (Acts 5:15-16; Jas 5:14-15).

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Liturgy

How are the sick and dying related to the liturgy? The sick and dying are members of the celebrating Church whose person and offering are equal in dignity to those who are healthy. They are not merely recipients of the Church's care but active members of Christ's Mystical Body. For this reason, the Church has always been eager to visit and pray with the sick and the dying and, when they are absent from the celebration of the Eucharist, to bring them Holy Communion (cf. St. Justin the Martyr, First Apology, nos. 65, 67). Today, the Church also provides for the Eucharist to be celebrated in the homes of the sick (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 932 §1; *Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America*, no. 54; *Pastoral Care of the Sick:*

Rites for Anointing and Viaticum, no. 77). Through participation in the Eucharist, the sick not only offer a sacrifice to the Lord, but they also may receive "health of body and soul" (Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, Prayer after Communion). In the Mass "For the Sick," the Church asks the Lord to grant health to the sick so that they may be restored to the Eucharistic celebration and "give you thanks in the midst of your Church" (*Roman Missal*, Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, no. 45, Collect).

How does the liturgy express and enact care for the sick and dying? The Eucharist is the action by which the sick and dying become one with the self-giving love of Christ and become capable of a suffering and death like his. The Church's sacramental care for the sick and dying flows from and is directed toward the liturgy, whose heart is the Eucharist. In the Eucharistic Prayer, bread and wine become Christ's Body and Blood, which is brought to the sick as Communion and the dying as Viaticum. At the Chrism Mass, the blessing of the Oil of the Sick traditionally takes place at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. The unique context of this blessing underscores the fact that the Eucharist is the source of the Church's care for the sick.

Additionally, the sick and the dying should be frequently included in the petitions of the Universal Prayer (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 70c). During the Solemn Intercessions on Good Friday, the Church asks the Lord to grant "health to the sick, and salvation to the dying" (intention X).

Finally, from time to time the Church celebrates special Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, three of which in the *Roman Missal* concern the sick and the dying:

- "For the Sick" (no. 45)
- "For the Dying" (no. 46)
- "For the Grace of a Happy Death" (no. 47)

Action

The extraordinary time of the COVID-19 pandemic led the Church to carry out her life in new ways. Unable to visit the sick in person, many parishes began to reach out by telephone. Liturgical celebrations broadcast digitally became more common. It is important for communities to reflect upon these practices now that liturgical life has returned to normal. There may be some which have fallen away or been scaled back but should be retained. Others may have been unduly continued and should be reevaluated.

In his Apostolic Letter on liturgical formation, *Desiderio desideravi*, Pope Francis notes that broadcasting liturgies by digital means is "not always opportune" and "needs further reflection" (no. 54). While the homebound now have greater digital access to liturgies, this access cannot replace the Church's personal care for the sick and the dying. Live-streamed liturgies should not diminish the Church's eagerness to visit and pray in person with the sick, to bring them Communion, to provide transportation for those who are in need, or to make places of worship accessible and welcoming spaces for those who are sick, elderly, or disabled. To outsource the care of the sick to technologies such as YouTube, Twitch, or Facebook Live would be to ignore the example and command of Christ: "When I was sick, *you visited me*" (Mt 25:36, emphasis added). Worship in a community of embodied persons is the right and duty of every member of the Christian people, whether healthy or sick (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 14); no Christian should be deprived of gathering as two or three (Mt 18:20).

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